



THE BARCODE PODCAST Episode 006

Ben Frohlichstein: Finding and Focusing on Your North Star

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Welcome to The Barcode Podcast, where we equip emerging consumer brands. I'm Ben Ponder, and at Barcode, we're here to give our listeners the knowledge and tools you need to thrive in the marketplace.

It is SO exciting when you create a product that never existed before, and people love it enough to start buying it. But with that excitement comes a host of challenges - how do you find and stay focused on your North Star values as your company grows? How do you balance scaling your business and leading the people who are doing the work that helps you scale?

We're talking through those issues and more in my conversation with our guest today - Ben Frohlichstein. Ben and his co-founder Stacey Marcellus are the co-CEOs of [Cappello's](#) where they create grain-free pizzas, pasta, and cookie dough for food lovers everywhere.

BEN PONDER: I'm really excited to have Ben Frohlichstein with me, uh, today in the studio. Ben and, uh, and Stacey, uh, are co-founders of, uh, [Cappello's Grain-Free](#) all kinds of stuff. We're going to get into all the things that they- they make because it's not, it's not simple anymore. Maybe it was simple lo- a long time ago. It's just, uh, just a simple, uh, pasta-pasta and pizza company, and now it's- i- it's spun out to all these other interesting frozen entrees and cookie doughs and all this stuff. We're going to dig into- into their business, and I'm really excited. Ben is a, i- is a great high-energy, uh, interesting artistic guy, and I'm- I'm really excited to have you in the studio. So- so, good to see you, Ben.

BEN FROLICHSTEIN: Thanks, Ben.

BEN P: Okay. So, let's- let's kind of start. We're- we're not going to, uh, m- maybe go down the- the traditional conversational path here where we just do the- the standard, uh, PR bits about le- tell me, tell me in the beginning. I'd love to hear from you, uh, if you have one or- or even two of, like, favorite meals that really resonated deeply with you in your

childhood or adolescence or something like that. Tell us about them, and what did they, what did they mean to you?

BEN F: Hmm. Um, so I have two that come-

BEN P: Perfect.

BEN F: ... to mind immediately (laughs).

BEN P: Perfect.

BEN F: Um, neither of them I would say are, um, more on the blissful side of memories. One of my most I think pronounced eating memories in my mind is ... So I have two siblings, I have a younger brother and younger sister. Um, my younger brother also works with us full-time at Cappello's. He did all of our creative direction, all of the branded, um, collateral for Cappello's and look and feel of Cappello's he's responsible for.

BEN P: That's really helpful to have talented family members.

BEN F: It- it really is. Well, (laughs) y- and there's, you know, a love, uh, a love-work relationship there that's always in process too.

BEN P: Of course.

BEN F: Um, but so one of my earliest memories, uh, that I go to immediately is, and I don't know why this has always stayed with me, but I picture our kitchen table. We had two bench seats and two heads of table, and my brother and I always sat, um, at the bench seat closest to the kitchen counter, and I don't know why my mom put us there to be honest, because (laughs) 90% of the time it was just mayhem.

But he loved black olives, and I recently have been able to start to enjoy black olives again. But for many years I was unable to, because he would put them on each one of his fingers. You know the black olives with the hollowed-out-

BEN F: ... and he would do, like, you know, put them in my face or whatever, and then he would eat them. He would, like, you know, suck them off each finger, and it just, it just drove me bananas. And-

BEN P: This is going in a completely different direction.

BEN F: (laughs)

BEN P: I- I thought you were gonna say, "My brother had this very sophisticated palate, and he really preferred, uh, these, you know, i- Italian olives, and that's where they-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: No. Typical kid.

BEN F: No, yeah, we were, you know, a very- very, uh, typical Midwest, um, family, you know, uh, the black olives from the can-

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: ... you know, iceberg lettuce, you know, the whole thing. And we ate ... You know, my mom was a great, uh, cook in the sense that she had some really classic go-tos, you know, the casseroles and, um, and we were always very well-fed. But I would say, um, that kind of Whole Foods shopper experience in that world that I live in now was not the world that I grew up in by any means.

BEN P: Absolutely. And we'll, uh, we'll come, we'll come back and revisit that a little bit-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... because I think that that transition and that- that awakening to what- what food is and what it should be is- is really important I think in your journey. But okay. So- so that- that's one-

BEN F: Yeah, that's one.

BEN P: ... one moment where-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... where it- it ... You- you had a little olive PTSD-

BEN F: Yep.

BEN P: ... because of your brother. Now, what- what's the second one?

BEN F: So, the second one, I- I remember this only because my mother loves to tell me this story often, and there was this really, um, great kind of classic Americana diner by our house at ... that I grew up in, and we would go there every Monday night, 'cause kids ate for free. And my dad, um, you know, bless his heart, but he worked a lot, and so my mom would, you know ... This was probably when my sister was maybe just born. Um, she's eight years younger than me, my brother's two and a half years younger than me. And I remember going to, it was called Colonial Café, and they had a coloring contest, and my mom would bring this giant box, um, it was more like a bucket, of crayons. And, you know, we would ... My brother and I would just-

BEN P: You supplied your own crayons for the coloring contest?

BEN F: Well, we wou- ... Because we would go there so frequently, we always-

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: ... knew there would be a- a menu to color on. This time they had a contest. Um, so we always brought our own crayons 'cause, you know, bring your own crayons.

BEN P: That's- that's a prepared mom right there.

BEN F: BYOC. (laughs)

BEN P: That's right, yeah.

BEN F: Um, yeah, very prepared. And my, and- and my mom, I feel like she influenced a lot of, um, my brother and I's love for the arts. She's a great crafter and has this command center in our basement full of sewing tables and machines of all sorts, and she's now etching glass, and she's always doing something really-

BEN P: That's awesome.

BEN F: ... interesting. But so they had a coloring contest, um, and, you know, we f- we did the coloring contest, totally forget about it. Flash forward to a week later, um, and I ... This doesn't relate to food other than this is at a café, but it somehow stuck with me when you asked-

BEN P: Of course.

BEN F: Um, and I had decided I was gonna run away.

BEN P: That was the moment.

BEN F: So this is a week later. I'm ... I have my little suitcase that I had, um, reappropriated from my ... or my mom. I had taken it from her. "Reappropriated," I don't know if that's the right word. But I took it from her.

BEN P: Uh-huh (affirmative).

BEN F: It was her suitcase when she was a kid, and it- it was-

BEN P: Uh-huh (affirmative).

BEN F: ... this little teal, you know, very classic-looking suitcase. It had a little square mirror in it that had these two little blue ribbons that held it in place, and I r- I just really remember that, and I filled it up with my stuff and I was, you know, very adamant to my mother and my father that I was leaving.

BEN P: How old are- are you at this time?

BEN F: I'm probably, um ... So maybe Rachel wasn't born yet. I was probably either seven or nine, and I just can't remember if she was in the picture yet or not. I was young. Um, and so, I- I had my bags packed, I was ... my bag, at the door, and I mean, I'm ready.

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: I'm going. And my mom and dad are standing-

BEN P: As a, as a seven and nine-year-old, you're ... It's like, "I- I'm done with these people. I'm doing this on my own."

BEN F: I've got it figured out.

BEN P: That's right. (laughs)

BEN F: And, you know, my mom and dad, bless their heart, they're like, "Good luck." You know? "You got this. I- I think you got this." And so, you know, I'm waiting though for them to kind of reel me back, I'm sure, as I'm pushing the boundaries here.

BEN P: Uh-huh (affirmative).

BEN F: And-the phone rings, and- and she- she's on the phone. She comes back and she goes, "So, I- I just want to ask you before you leave and we never see you again-"

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: "... um, you won the coloring contest. Do you want to go see Fievel Goes West with (laughs) me and your m- with me and your brother, um, this weekend?" because that was the prize. And, you know, that was, that was a big inflection point in my life there-

BEN P: Or should you, should- should you, should you delay I- leaving and setting out on your own?

BEN F: Right, you know? And maybe I could have seen Fievel Goes West on my own. So, you know, there's a lot to digest in that moment.

BEN P: Absolutely.

BEN F: Um, ultimately I decided to unpack the suitcase and-

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: ... you know, become a pasta maker years later. (laughs)

BEN P: I love it. Oh, that's a great story.

BEN F: Ah.

BEN P: I love it, yeah. And I think we all have that moment, and probably all had some version of the same teal suitcase, right? The just-

BEN F: Right?

BEN P: ... you know, hardened case-

BEN F: Yep.

BEN P: ... uh, on the outside of it, just the- the quintessential '70s, '80s, '90s version of the-

BEN F: Absolutely, with the little click sides and, yeah.

BEN P: Absolutely, absolutely.

BEN F: Kind of like a briefcase.

BEN P: That's right. I love it, I love it. Well, let's ... So- so tran- uh, transitioning a little bit to, uh, grown-up life-

BEN F: Yep.

BEN P: ... you and your co-founder, Stacey-

BEN F: Sure.

BEN P: ... separately had, uh, had- had found yourselves, uh ... You guys had been friends earlier in life-

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: ... and you- you both in different parts of the country found yourselves kind of knee-deep, maybe literally, in the organic agriculture movement. How did you, how did you end up on a farm? What was the, what was the journey for you from, uh, you know, just kind of standard iceberg lettuce Midwest kid to, uh, to working day and night under the- the beating hot sun?

BEN F: I grew up in the Midwest, um, as I said earlier, but I went to college at CU Boulder, and so the, you know, organic movement, farm-to-table, you know, very kind of progressive modern nutrition take is- is very prevalent there. And I- I dropped out of college, um, but when I was kind of seeking-

BEN P: Wha- what did you study-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... when you were, when- when you were there?

BEN F: That's a great question.

BEN P: It was (laughs) ... That's one of the reasons I dropped out is-

BEN F: Let me cir- let me circle back.

BEN P: ... I never quite-

Multiple people: (laughing)

BEN F: Um, so my, uh, emphasis was environmental studies.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: And what I think is interesting with that is I ... when I was younger, when I was in high school, I really ... I spent most of my time ditching school and in the art room, and those were the two time- two places I spent most of my time, was outside of school as much as I could be and in the art studio. But there was something that told me I couldn't or shouldn't pursue trying to be a professional artist.

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: I felt like that was a ... too much of a pipe dream, that- that the odds of actually making that ... And whatever dialogue I've made in my head about, you know, not pursuing that, I always kind of felt like I could do something more traditional and always have this kind of artistic outlet-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: ... and that was more rational or seemed more reasonable, which is interesting, 'cause my father was a professional musician.

BEN P: Okay.

BEN F: And there was never any lack of encouragement-

BEN P: What did he, what- what- what did he ... what- what does he play?

BEN F: So my dad, um, plays trumpet-

BEN P: Okay.

BEN F: ... and he was very gifted, um, you know, just naturally. And so he played, um, right i- in college, he went to c- college in Chicago, and was already playing with Dizzy Gillespie and-

BEN P: Wow.

BEN F: ... studied under all sorts of just incredible people and- and- and has a master's degree in music education, and was playing gigs in the city when he was in college. So by the time he was out he was already, you know, first chair on some of the big Broadway shows like Cats and Les Mis and ... I mean, you name it, he- he was playing them, and ultimately the- the schedule just didn't ... was in confliction with, or conflict with, the way in which my mom and dad kind of envisioned raising their family, and, you know, he was-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... always on the weekends playing, always playing matinees. He was gone all the time. And Styx asked him to go on tour-

BEN P: Okay.

BEN F: ... and my mom said, you know, "That's amazing. What are ...," you know. And here's this guy who's living his dream, and my dad, you know, he ... well, still he talks about this, is that when he was doing all that it was like he never worked a day in his life, 'cause he was so-

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: ... just passionate and loved playing music, and- and he still does, and he's actually revived that. But-

BEN P: And for the younger set listening, Styx was a big, big deal.

BEN F: Styx was a big deal, yeah.

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: Um, and so y- I think we can see where this is going, but ultimately he made ... had to make a choice around his family-

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: ... or- or music, and ultimately he chose his family. And I'm really glad he did, and I think he is too, because in the early kind of '80s when he was making these decisions, the music industry that he kind of grew up in was changing so rapidly as commercial, you know, gigs, you know, for playing commercials, for playing recorded, um, studio music, was just evaporating, 'cause everything was getting digitized. So he kind of saw the writing on the wall and knew he needed to do, um, to do something different.

So I guess that- that idea of not being able to make it as an artist or doing something that you're truly passionate about, that was never an ... even, you know, something that was combative in my family-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: ... 'cause my dad had done that.

BEN P: Yeah, yeah.

BEN F: So it was interesting that I had created this-

BEN P: So really you got, you- you- you-

BEN F: ... false paradigm-

BEN P: ... well, but you got, you got this really-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... strong artistic bent from both parents too, right?

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: You- the- the musician and then the- the- the- the crafty arts-

BEN F: Culture, yeah.

BEN P: Like, uh, yeah, all- all of that stuff, yeah. That's- that's great. So, okay. So- so, you're ... you have this artistic bent, you don't like going to school, you know that-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... you really, you really-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... dig hanging out in the art studio. You go to CU Boulder-

BEN F: Still went to college for a reason. (laughs)

BEN P: Yeah, the ... Still- still went to college, yeah. (laughs)

BEN F: Yep.

BEN P: Because that's what-

BEN F: That's what you do.

BEN P: ... a good, that's what a good Midwestern kid should do.

BEN F: Yeah, absolutely.

BEN P: And- and so then you get there-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... you- you're exposed to this whole organic movement and that sort of thing. How do you end up on the farm?

BEN F: Yeah, that was actually, I mean, years later. I think what I was more exposed to, um, at CU was just, you know, partying (laughs), you know? Honestly, which was-

BEN P: Good solid college experience.

BEN F: Yeah, I guess, you know? And I ... Looking back on it, it was s- you know, such a waste of- of energy, um-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: ... where I put that. But I think I ... It was 'cause I was lost a little bit, and I wasn't following my- my heart as much. And so that actually, that awakening which led me to the organic farm, happened probably, you know, eight years, 10 years after I had been in Boulder really.

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: And so in 2010, so I went to college in 2000, 2010, um, I had left a fairly successful career in the real estate industry. Uh, I had worked for some, um, brothers, two, um ... this ... the- these very ambitious brothers who had come from New York. They had started a real estate, um, shop in Boulder. I ended up following ... you know, finding an a- ad on Craigslist, and setting up open house signs for these guys.

And, again, I'm, you know, just kind of, like, floating around in Boulder trying to figure out what is it that I want to do, where is my passions, and I saw them, this was 2004, um, I saw them having all this success and I realized, you know, "The only thing that's separating me from these guys is that I don't have a real estate license." So I went and got that, and that n- ... those next couple years were, anyone with a pulse could sell real estate, right? (laughs)

BEN P: Right, yeah.

BEN F: Um, so it was really an exciting time. I was 22, twenty-f- you know, four or whatever, and, like-

BEN P: Making money.

BEN F: ... making money-

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: ... having fun. We ended up growing the largest team in Coldwell Banker in the country.

BEN P: Wow.

BEN F: Um, we left Coldwell Banker, we started our own shop. Um, but kind of going back to that feeling lost part, like, all those kind of cliché things of, like, having the- the money and all, you know, all these things, but none of it was fulfilling really.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: In the beginning it was 'cause it was new and it was exciting and I was learning something new and learning a new industry, but as I started to go further and further into that world, I just was ... It wasn't something I was interested in. And I didn't want that to be kind of my legacy or, like, what I was, you know, leaving as my mark in the world. And so ultimately I left, I left that organization and did some soul-searching. And I at the time was dating this woman who was ... I had been introduced to, and she was living as a yoga ashram in Upstate New York, and we had kind of this long-distance relationship. And that was when I first got turned on to ... really turned on to yoga, and being-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... in Boulder you couldn't miss it.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: Um, and- and that sparked something in me, and I started to practice yoga every morning and every night. I started to change my eating habits, um, lost kind of that college weight, I'll call it, and really kind of stopped partying, um, started to actually eat a paleo diet. Not because I knew that-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: ... was a thing. I just cut carbs out and started-

BEN P: It wasn't a label that you were seeking at that point, yeah.

BEN F: Yeah. I just, I- I- I felt better when I didn't eat a lot of carbs. Um, so I started to run and I started to exercise more and be more conscious of what I was eating, and- and there was just this summer I had where I really had this, like, awakening. Um, I was doing a ton of Japa meditation, which is the repetitive mantra meditation. Um, I was, again, practicing yoga twice a day, I would run in the afternoon, and because of the way I'd kind of set up my life, and also my parents were very generous in this- this time period too, but I had some rental properties and some income, and so I had some time wealth, and I had a little bit of cash that I could do some things with, you know?

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: Do some ... have- have free time to do yoga and-

BEN P: E- explore.

BEN F: ... explore, yeah.

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: Um, but ultimately, yeah, that is what led me to the farm, because I- I started to get this romantic idea of, like, really connecting with where food was coming from as I was going on this food journey. And, like, also through the yoga and the meditation, I had this vision of, like, "What would it be like if you lived not in isolation, but you lived at a farm or you had some connection to some sort of land where everything you ate and almost did was all connected to that?" And I know this isn't a new idea, but I wanted to see, like, what ... How high could your vibration be if, like, literally everything you were touching you had either planted or grown or been a part of in some way? And, like, what would that do to the soul?

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: I had no kind of starting point, so I was just telling friends about, you know, where I was at, and one of my friends said, "Hey, I- I know the, um, proprietor of the Black Cat

Restaurant, and he also has this farm called the Black Cat Farm, and I can introduce you guys." A- and- and so she did, and that- that was really the- the beginning to everything I'm doing now, because I met Eric and he was a recovering attorney (laughs).

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: Um, he had this really amazing farm-to-table restaurant in Boulder, and he still does, but he also had the farm. And so here it was, like, this person more or less doing exactly kind of what I'm talking about in a little bit of a different format, but he was growing all the vegetables, he was, you know, in touch with all the- the, um, animals, and- a- and bringing it into his restaurant, and it was really inspiring. And what I came out of that though with was it was hard as hell. (laughs)

BEN P: Absolutely.

BEN F: And, like, grueling. I mean, like, all the farming and then running the restaurant, and seeing him do this, and he had this beautiful family and, like, they were all in, right?

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: But, uh, there was just this, and this is the naïve part of me, because, um, the time wealth has evaporated (laughs) as we've grown-

BEN P: Sure, yeah.

BEN F: ... grown this business, um, but I- I saw that and I said, "You know, he just doesn't ... It seems like he's too ... like, there's no break." Um, and also, like, I didn't see how you could scale that and, like, ever maybe ... 'cause I had had a little taste of the real estate money we'll call it and that world. I was still always attracted to having the opportunity to have a nest egg or some sort of way of not having to work all the time, but have some income-

BEN P: Sure.

BEN F: ... to be totally honest.

BEN P: Absolutely. Very common.

BEN F: So why not get into this business, right?

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: Because (laughs)-

BEN P: (laughs) 'Cause that'll be easy.

BEN F: Yeah, exactly.

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: I mean, the- the- the young version of me then, if I knew what I knew now, I wouldn't do anything different. I really wouldn't-

BEN P: Of course.

BEN F: ... because the journey has been so incredibly rewarding, but damn, how foolish-

BEN P: Absolutely.

BEN F: ... um, that was.

BEN P: Well, and- and I think there's an element of that naivete that's im- that- that's important, right? Because if you were ... if you're too, you know, seasoned and cynical, sometimes you go, "Oh, maybe not."

BEN F: Of course.

BEN P: You know? And so, there's that youthful enthusiasm, like, "Why not? I'll- I'll- I'll do my own farm thing."

BEN F: Absolutely.

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: Yeah, now you know you'd be like, "Okay, well, what's a defensible kind of channel, or what's a defensible product, you know, that no one's in? And let's get that gross margin pumping," and, you know-

BEN P: All- all the things. Absolutely.

BEN F: ... velocity-driven, you know.

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: Pretty much all the things you guys did at Siete.

BEN P: That's right.

BEN F: (laughs)

BEN P: Yeah. So that's where ... so, uh, so how long, how long were you i- in this, uh-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... farmer season? Farmer bin?

BEN F: So, yeah, I was there, um, pretty much one summer.

BEN P: Okay. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: And so as you mentioned-

BEN P: But it was a very powerful summer for you.

BEN F: Absolutely, yeah.

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: I mean, I was, like ... I remember my parents and just my family and friends just like, "What is up with you?" And it was 'cause I- I had, I had gone through, like, a metamorphosis. Um, it wasn't quite Kafkaesque, but it was-

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: ... it (laughs) was powerful, and I- I had just become this new person, or I had evolved into someone that I- I really wanted to be, which was more present and connected, and not so just kind of wild and- and out of control. And, um, and the yoga and the, and the diet really was the foundation for that, and- and-

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: ... and- and the mantra. The- the- the Japa meditation was something I really dropped into.

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: And has continued to be really foundational, um, for me to this day.

So that summer was super transformative, and what is so fascinating, and I still have no way of really being able to piece this all together, what it all means, but so Stacey and I, as you mentioned, were both on farms. Um, she happened to be on a farm though in the southern tip of Argentina at the same time-

BEN P: A little ways away.

BEN F: ... I was doing this. Um, but we had met in Boulder years, um, earlier and- and Stacey had been my hairstylist, and- and we were never, like, best friends, and- and I think that's always been probably really good for our relationship. You know, I can think of, like, in the last couple years a handful of times that we've hung out really outside of work. Um-

BEN P: You had your own lives.

BEN F: We have always-

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: ... had our own lives, um-

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: ... but really a- always had just a- a fondness and a respect for one another. And so when she came back from Argentina I just shot her an email and said, "Hey, just checking in on you. You know, are you still down there? Where ... What's up with you?" And, you know, "Would love to reconnect." And she, you know, lets me know, "I'm ... Actually I'm coming back. I'm thinking of going to culinary school. Um, I was working on an organic farm down there," and I'm like, "No way." I'm like, "I wa- ...," you know? And so she comes back to Colorado and we just start sharing, you know, our experiences from the last, you know, year and a half or so, and she saw the passion that I had for farming, and I saw her passion for wanting to, um, you know, to do something in the food space, potentially going to culinary school or- or something to that extent. And also in that window of time, back to kind of seeing the limitations that the farm and the restaurant had, at least from my viewpoint, you know?

And, um, but I didn't ... Again, I didn't ... I- I was always interested in scale. You know, going back to, like, largest team in Coldwell Banker, and, like-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... there was, there was just something about scale that always really fascinated me, and-

BEN P: Was it the growth part of it? Or what- what part of scale was-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... so intriguing to you?

BEN F: You know, I ... For me ho- honestly, I think it's all, like, the- the spiderweb of lives that you're able-

BEN P: Hmm.

BEN F: ... to touch, and with Cappello's, that was always such a driver for me was exploring, like, you know, there's millions of people ... Billions of people every day are having an experience with a packaged good-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... for the most part, unless you can go into my utopic farm view (laughs), you know? And- and maybe I'll get there someday, but, um, but for the most part, everyone is, you know, they're either drinking a Coca-Cola or they're- they're picking something up off the shelf that i- this whole network of people had to be in place to get there. And then there's just-

BEN P: Uh-huh (affirmative).

BEN F: ... this one moment that the consumer has, especially with food, where they open that up and then they eat it. And, like, that's the energy. That's the lifeblood that we all need every day to exist, and- and, you know, food is- is life. And- and I was just so fascinated with the scale around that and that kind of exchange that goes all the way to origin to

the person, and- and seeing that in the farm, but then wondering how you could give that experience, um, to someone in a grocery store. So, I- I think the scale for me, and even in the real estate thing, was- was just, like, all the people involved and all, like, the different lives and- and how they weave together and how they're also maybe driving towards a similar goal. Like, that just fascinated me. It always has.

BEN P: Were- were you ever intimidated by the complexity that's baked into that at all? Or did you ... that it- it was really about, you know, again, because that scale-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... stuff gets more complex often.

BEN F: Sure.

BEN P: And so, was- was that ever a- a thought that- that crossed your mind?

BEN F: It wasn't. Um, but I know my limitations, and that's where I also saw in Stacey, she's a great operator-

BEN P: Mmm.

BEN F: ... and she has a really great way of viewing things in a more kind of formulaic sense. I mean, she did all of our formula and- and recipe development, but also too when I think about the infrastructure that the two of us have developed together within the organization, um, Stacey's much better at process, and I tend to have a little bit more of, like, the drive towards what's next or how can we ... And- and that's even evolved-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... as it's come. But going just back to leaving, um ... not leaving the farm, but to reconnecting with Stacey and having just ... I had lots of different ideas for something that could be branded and scaled.

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: Uh, I had, like, a- an idea to have at the top of, like, a Gatorade bottle, a little vitamin powder mix that you would crack open and, like, someone's done that.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: Um, but, you know, I didn't see it.

BEN P: Usually a sign that it was probably a good idea, yeah.

BEN F: (laughs) And I just had all sor- ... I had, uh, a- a thing I wanted to do with my friend, uh, Bret called One T, and he had ... has one "T" in his name. I had all these just ... I was just,

BEN P: You're an i- you're an idea guy, right? You had all-

BEN F: (laughs)

BEN P: ... these interesting ideas, and- and-

BEN F: I don't know how many of them were interesting, but I had-

BEN P: Ut- ut-

BEN F: ... a lot of ideas.

BEN P: ... you had, you had a lot of ideas (laughs).

BEN F: As my brother said, I ... yeah, a lot of ideas. This one stuck, the Cappello's

BEN P: That's awesome. Okay, so- so you and Stacey go from-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... having this- this casual reconnecting conversation to actually starting a business.

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: How does that happen?

BEN F: Yeah, and so that- that sharing just the kind of passion for wanting to do something tangible and scalable, those were very important to me. I was making fresh pasta at my friend's house, and it just, the light bulb went off and I said, "This is my thing. Like, I feel like this is ..." The complexity is low, the kind of understanding of pasta is very high (laughs)-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... and there's nothing that from my viewpoint at the ... in those early days that was branded very well in the grocery store. And so I was like, "I want to do a fresh pasta company," and I was buying fresh pasta, not a lot, but I would buy fresh pasta at Whole Foods.

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: Um, because again, I wasn't doing a lot of carbs, but there was something about having a big bowl of pasta, a big, fresh salad, and a bottle of wine and bringing people together. I love that, and I got that-

BEN P: It's very powerful, yeah.

BEN F: Totally. And just so, um, uh, uh, what's the word? It- it's just familiar.

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: And that was really interesting to me, and so when I, um, told Stacey about this idea I had, I remember, I was up in Vail. So she came back from Argentina. She was born and raised in Boulder, but she, um, went, um, up to Vail to finish out the ski season when she got back. So I would go up there and snowboard with her, and- and I'm telling her about, you know, my dream of this farm and all, you know, all these millions of different ideas I've ... From One T to-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... the Gatorade thing to vitam- ... I mean, I was ... go on and on. Um, but then I came back up after I had made pasta at my friend's house and I said, "I think I know what I really want to do. I want to do a pasta company." And she said, "Well, you know, I ac- I found out I have to be gluten-free. What if we do a gluten-free pasta?" And that just hit me, you know, so hard, because I- I ... This was in 2010, November 2010. One of our really good family friends had almost died from celiac, undiagnosed celiac disease. So I was pretty familiar with that as a real issue. Um-

BEN P: But this is before the- the kind of gluten-free craze, right?

BEN F: Absolutely.

BEN P: You- you guys were a- ahead of that. You knew ... you- you had a- a personal experience with somebody who had celiac. That was beginning to be I think known to certain people, but-

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: ... this was not, like, peak gluten-free. This is-

BEN F: No.

BEN P: ... way before that, yeah.

BEN F: Yeah. And it was really at ... almost, like, at the very beginning of that, and being in Boulder I even started to get more of that. And in the restaurant, right, there started to be more-

BEN P: That's right.

BEN F: ... awareness of that. And so tho- that was all kind of, like, real in that moment for me, and I- I genuinely think if I wouldn't ... Of course, with anything, you know, it's all right place, right time-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... and kind of you're- you're the, um, what is it? The whole ... You're the sum of all your experiences or-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: And- and so, when she said that it- it just hit, and I also thought, "That's different. That's a way to be different, um, and there's something there to stand out."

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: And so, I was just like, "Yeah, that sounds awesome." And I remember, we sat down on our living room floor and I got out my little sketch book, and we just started talking. And I was like, "You know, I really want it to be black and white. I want it to have this, like, kind of old-world feel, but, like, met with new, very modern design, and I want ..." I actually really want-

BEN P: That's fascinating that you went, you went design, brand first.

BEN F: We even had the name of for- Cappello's before we had cut one noodle.

BEN P: That's- that's amazing.

BEN F: Um-

BEN P: A- and- and is that ... Were you guys on the same, uh, on the same page with that? Like, so- so you were really picturing the brand-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... even before you had worked out the process of, "Yeah, what are we making these gluten-free noodles with?"

BEN F: Yeah, absolutely.

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: Yeah, I mean, I- I- I wanted it to kind of hit on, like, the Looney Tunes, uh, Acme box that Wiley E. Coyote would get.

BEN P: Yeah, yeah.

BEN F: You know, like, I- I think like that, and also, like-

BEN P: Super-iconic consumer packaged goods.

BEN F: Absolutely. And- and then I thought about too, like in my early childhood memories going back to just my early food kind of memories. I remember all of the Aldi's, um, packages in my mom's, uh, cupboard, like, j- that just said "flour," you know? And it just said-

BEN P: Radically simple.

BEN F: Just so simple, and, like, that just stuck with me.

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: And so I was, you know, all excited about that, and- and Stacey, you know, we're getting- getting the juices flowing, and we're like, "Well, what should we call it?" And we're just being silly, and my last name is Frohlichstein, right? That is, like, a long name, and as I was ... we were talking before the- the podcast, like, there's two big H's in that 13-letter last name that are very intimidating, (laughs) so you're not going to be putting that on the front of pack-

BEN P: (laughs).

BEN F: Um, and so we're like, "Well, what if we call it 'Benjamino's'?" And we're just being silly-

BEN P: Sure.

BEN F: ... at this point. And luckily, Stacey when she was a rebellious 17-year-old got her mother's maiden name, which is "Cappello," tattooed on the inside of her forearm. So we're sitting there on the floor, and I look down and I s- "Cappello. Cappello's." And just, we kept saying it and the weighting of "Cappello," um, the way it should be spelled. Everyone loves to leave out one of the P's, but it's two P's, two L's, so you have this drop with the P's and the height with the L's, and it just looked right, and it just felt right.

BEN P: So, like, in the visual s- ... So the sound of-

BEN F: Absolutely.

BEN P: ... the sound and the visuals of actually writing out on, and in this case, on her arm.

BEN F: Yep.

BEN P: Uh, but then as you, as you wrote in your sketch book, you just knew that that set of letters and- and vowels and consonants-

BEN F: Yep.

BEN P: ... that that s- that resonated with you.

BEN F: Oh, I still have the sketch book. It has all the kind of ... You know, it says "Cappello's," it says "pasta" really big. Um, 'cause even though we were going to do gluten-free, we were just ... we just want it to be great pasta. And, like, we're even talking about the product attributes in terms of the quality before any recipe had even been played with. Um, but yeah, the aesthetic, and it's interesting. I- I was just invited to be part of ... Coca-Cola has a venture division, and-

BEN P: VEB?

BEN F: VEB, yeah.

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Ven- Venturing and Emerging Brands, or-

BEN F: Yes.

BEN P: ... so- yeah, mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: And great curation of entrepreneurs, and this is I think class six. We had our first meeting a couple weeks ago in- in Atlanta, but they had us do the Hogan, uh, assessment, it's another one of these kind of personality tests that they ... you can give to executives, you can give to anyone, but it's- it's more geared towards kind of corporate America I think, and understanding leadership abilities and strengths and weaknesses and r- areas for improvement. And my assessment came back, and in terms of aesthetic leadership, I was, like, almost, like, at 100%.

BEN P: Off the charts.

BEN F: And- and I was like, "Uh, well, of course."

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: That totally makes sense now, you know? And other areas that I've ... I definitely saw I needed some help in, but, um ... In fact, can I, can I tell you a funny story?

BEN P: Absolutely.

BEN F: Okay. So, there's, um, I think 13 of us in this group, and they- they do the ... you know, every one of us took this assessment. It was a three-part assessment.

BEN P: This is at the Coca-Cola headquarters in Atlanta?

BEN F: Yep. And they have someone from the Hogan Group come in and give us, you know, some insights into what we all ... what- what does this all mean. And one of the exercises that they had was they took the people who scored the lowest, um, on people leadership, which isn't a bad thing. You know, none of these are bad things.

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: These again are just areas for improvement, because what I found interesting-

BEN P: Just know thyself.

BEN F: Yeah. And that's the biggest thing-

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: ... is the self-awareness, is what they talk about, is the number one ... At least through their lens, the number one attribute of good leadership is self-awareness. And they showed this chart of all these, you know, top 500 ... you know, Fortune 500 CEOs who have taken this and, like, where they all s- ... and it's just a mess. There's no one size fits all, as we all know.

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: But the self-awareness piece was really big, and so the ... they have ... Like, they broke us into groups and they had the group of- of, um, participants who had scored the highest on the people piece on one side of the room. They had me and just one other person (laughs) who scored the lowest on the people piece answer this question. The question was, "If you have 20 kids on a soccer team and you get selected to go to the playoffs, but only 14 can go, how do you decide what to do with the other six?" And because there was only two of us, um, on the- the lower people piece-

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: ... um, the person doing the Hogan assessment, or the person there from Hogan, said, "Hey, I'll come over and work with you guys."

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: You know? And meanwhile, like, there are seven or eight other people. Not everyone ... You know, some people were in the middle, so they just kind of observed. And so the people over on the other side are really, like, getting into it, and me and the other entrepreneur who I will not name, um-

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: ... I said, "Well, yeah, that's- that's easy." And so the guy comes over and- and he's like, "Okay, so what ..." And I was like, "No, we already got it." I'm like, "We're just gonna rank them alphabetically and the first six just can't go."

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: And he's like, "Ha-ha, ho-ho. Um, what ... wait." He's like, "This guy sucks with people." Like, in his head I could see, like, the wheels, and he's like, "This guy is a psycho."

BEN P: "He's completely arbitrary."

BEN F: (laughs) And I'm like, "No, no, no. We can't do that, 'cause what if, like, our top players were al- ...," you know? And he's like, he just didn't know what to do with me.

BEN P: That's right.

BEN F: And then he realized I was joking-

BEN P: Uh-huh (affirmative).

BEN F: ... around a little bit.

BEN P: That's right.

BEN F: But what I came away with that was, so we- we ended up alternately, um, me and, uh, my fellow, uh, colleague or participant-

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: ... we came up with, you know, that we would do a series of, um, metrics. We'd have a little grid of metrics, and also some of it would be discretionary, and that would be how we would choose. And-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: ... that seemed pretty fair and pretty good.

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: The other group, and this is where even though they're very good on the people piece, they couldn't make their decision per se as quickly as we could, and that was, that was what the guy from Hogan was trying to show. He's like, "The people who have the kind of black and white, very quick to decisions-"

BEN P: There's just kind of the clarity of the corner office.

BEN F: Absolutely. And so, then on the other ... They kind of ... They had a couple different things. They wanted to really talk to each kid individually, and that was a-

BEN P: E- e- each special snowflake?

BEN F: And that's ... That was a light bulb moment for me.

BEN P: Sure.

BEN F: I realized that's how I can evolve as- as a leader, or- or just in my own personal life, is that I- I can easily make a decision when it comes to people-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... I guess, um, which sounds kind of ironic to say, I guess. But I- I feel pretty good in doing that. Uh, but what I can do is go that step further and then say, "Hey, this is what we did," but then pull each kid and say here-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: ... "This is what we did, and- and here's why." And that was a big moment for me-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: ... to think about how that influences the way I work within our organization. As I have been quick to make decisions that do affect people, and I don't think of it as, like, that it's going to affect them maybe as deeply as it might.

BEN P: Wow.

BEN F: And it's funny, because when you talked about, you know, what was it with the scale and all that, the people and all that was what was really intriguing to me, but I realized I struggle to get into the detail of the single person.

BEN P: Well, the scale is- i- is a, is a two-edged sword, right? You ... It's- it's really exciting, you have all these people, hopefully they're rowing in the same direction, but then there are these moments too where you realize, "Wow, the decisions that we're making impact so many people and their families and loved ones, and if we mess this up, man, it's not just, it's not just me and my livelihood or- or well-being-"

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: "... that are affected, it's ... it ripples." I- so- so you have both the positive and negative aspects of that that can be-

BEN F: Absolutely.

BEN P: ... really difficult to grapple with.

BEN F: Yet on the positive side of that though, I think about what, you know, we're doing for food and modern nutrition, and there's a great impact there-

BEN P: Tremendous.

BEN F: ... um, that I never, never ever anticipated when we were going to start the business. I mean, the consumer feedback that we get and the folks sending in photos of their daughter holding our pizza box because she has all these different autoimmune, you know, conditions, and- and how she can live a normal life and have pizza night, like, that stuff, like, I never-

BEN P: And not have gross, crackery pizza.

BEN F: Right.

BEN P: Like, have real good pizza.

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: And ag- and again, that was a driver, but I didn't really ... I had no way of, like, making that tangible or actually understanding what that meant when we started.

BEN P: Absolutely. We're going to continue this in a minute – we're just going to take a quick break.

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Back to the episode!

BEN P: We're- we're gonna fast-forward a bit from that moment where you come up with the name, you come up with the brand and that sort of thing. You guys decide, "We're doing this." How long did it take you from that point-

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: ... to get into your first store with- with your gluten-free pasta?

BEN F: Yeah. First store was a while. So, November we came up with the idea for Cappello's-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: ... and I remember Stacey calling me about a month later and saying, "Hey, how are the recipes coming on your end?"

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: And I was like, "Uh-"

BEN P: "Oh, those."

BEN F: "Oh, yes." And, like, that was probably the first time of many, many times I've disappointed her. (laughs) Um-

BEN P: You'd be like, "Stacey, did I mention I'm not strong at process?"

BEN F: Right.

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: Yes, yes. Um, oh, so much was revealed over time. Um, but a- but I realized in that moment she was actually really serious about it.

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: And- and I felt her desire to really try to see where this could go. And so I said, "Look. Hey, I've got this rental property in Denver I'm living in," or it was a rental property. I had moved into it. "I've got an extra bedroom. When the ski season is over, move up here and we'll give this thing a real go. And that should give us some time to kind of figure out maybe some of the pieces to get it up and running, some more recipe development. Um, but also just, like, some of the business parts, you know? Like if we're going to try to give this, um, a real shot, like, what does it mean to be in this space?"

So I'd, you know, I started to do the things that I was interested in, research and looking at competitors and what else was out there, and- and in 2010, 2011, um, two private equity guys bought Udi's Gluten Free from the Udi family in Denver, so they were just about ready to, like, give that thing, like, a go. So you already just started to see the gluten-free world come to life, because-

BEN P: And this is before the Boulder Brands thing, yeah.

BEN F: Before Boulder Brands, yeah. And so Stacey in April, and we made our first dollar at the Minturn Farmers Market June 8th, 2011. We had missed all the deadlines for farmers markets 'cause we were totally like, "Oh, you just show up, right?"

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: Like, it's a farmers market. Anyone can come! Uh-

BEN P: You just put on overalls and a ... and the right hat-

BEN F: And you're there. Um, but those are the things too, like, you know, as-

BEN P: You've got to learn it.

BEN F: You've got to learn it.

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: And- and- and so, we did a bunch of drop-ins as we learned, uh, how t- how to kind of n-network and- and understand how we could fit in and make some money, honestly just to generate revenue.

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: And we also had a lot of connections in the restaurant industry in Boulder, um, specifically. So, we were trying to hustle product into as many restaurants as we could, and The Med in Boulder, which is one of the highest-grossing restaurants in the state, still to this day uses our- our pasta. And our selling proposition to chefs was like, "Look, hey, you're getting bombarded with all these calls for gluten-free. Ours is the, you know, I think the best quality, but also cooks in 90 seconds." And that was something chefs really heard, because-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: ... most of the pasta that's still out there that's gluten-free is a, you know, 10-minute, 15-minute cook time, and- and the quality I- I still think isn't quite there for what Stacey developed. Um, but at the end of that summer we got into Lucky's Market in Boulder, Colorado when they only had one store.

BEN P: Okay.

BEN F: And- and so, it was, it was fairly quick, and that was also when-

BEN P: Which is a really iconic Boulder market.

BEN F: Absolutely, yeah. And that's where we also learned about what it meant to slack something out.

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: And freezing the product.

BEN P: You're like, "I spent a lot of time in- in college slacking. How hard-"

BEN F: Yeah (laughs).

BEN P: "... can this be?"

BEN F: Absolutely.

BEN P: Like, "Oh, it means a different thing." Yeah.

BEN F: If it's something different.

BEN P: Right. "Oh, thawing, yes."

BEN F: And so that the, um, the buyer who brought us in there, Tristan, who still is a part of- of Lucky's, and- and I try to drop in on him at least once a year and just, again, give him thanks because he gave us our first kind of break. But he also said, "Hey, freeze this right after you make it and then bring it into me, and you're gonna have a longer shelf life." And we're like, "Oh."

BEN P: "Good idea."

BEN F: Google.

BEN P: "Thanks, Tristan."

BEN F: Why? (laughs) You know?

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: Uh, but that's ... That is also what kind of got us into the frozen food business.

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: And- and what was interesting too is at the end of that summer we did the Incredible Edible Gluten-Free Fair, and this was a very small kind of fair until that year, when all of a sudden celiac awareness became way-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: ... way more, um, magnified. And we had, this was at the- the Denver Merchandise Mart, and we had, like, a line all the way through the mart to get one little noodle, and I was like, "Oh my God. Like, there is something here. Like, people are-"

BEN P: There's some demand.

BEN F: Dem- absolutely. And the next day we got a phone call from the group that had just purchased Udi's, and they said, "Hey, we want to meet with you guys." And we're like, "Oh, cool." Like, "What do you want to meet with us about?"

BEN P: That's very flat- very flattering.

Multiple people: (laughing)

BEN F: And I mean, we're literally still making this stuff in my kitchen.

BEN P: Oh, sure.

BEN F: It was a total shit show.

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: Um, and- and so we- we're like, "Yeah, we'd love to meet with you," and I remember we talked with Stacey's, um, stepfather, who is an attorney, and he's like, "You've just got to go in there and tell them that you've got a plan you're gonna execute against, and, like-

BEN P: That's right.

BEN F: "... you just, you play it like you guys are bigger than you are."

BEN P: Uh-huh (affirmative).

BEN F: I must have said "execute" in that meeting 50 times.

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: You know? (laughs)

BEN P: O- reading off your note cards. Yeah.

BEN F: And, like, they- they really rolled out the red carpet for us, and, like, the whole team, like, executive team was there, um, and, like, two minutes into this, they're like, "These guys are total jokers and have-

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: "... no clue what they're doing. Um, but they've got a great recipe."

BEN P: Well, and- and it is a private equity firm. Th- you're ... you were too small for them too at that, at that point.

BEN F: Well, there was ... I mean, our revenue at that point was \$11,000 maybe.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: And most of that was just cash in hand from the farmers market.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: Um, and so, they realized, you know, that we had a very expensive and difficult product to make, and it was not anything they were interested in. But we had their ear, so I started to ask them all the questions I could. I was like, "How did you guys get a million Facebook followers?"

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: "Oh, we bought them." I'm like, "Oh my god, they-"

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: "... spent a million dollars-"

BEN P: "That's a thing?" Yeah.

BEN F: I'm like, "They spent a million dollars on Facebook." Yeah, and this was 2011.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: Um, and they're like, "Yeah, and we also have all these, you know, celiac chapters that we're sending these huge care packages to, and we're also finding basically the head of the chapter and just evangelizing them."

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: And so, I- I really got a better understanding of their kind of grassroots marketing, and also, like, their paid marketing, like, what they were doing, and it was so effective. I mean-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... Udi's just went from zero to, you know, 60 quickly.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: Um, and- and that was really insightful, and that afternoon Stacey and I went back to the house and we said, "There's no way we can compete with these guys." And what we did in that, in that afternoon is we both shook hands on the fact that yes, we're gluten-free, but we're grain-free.

BEN P: Hmm.

BEN F: And we're going to own grain-free, because Udi's will never be gluten-free, or grain-free, I mean.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: They'll always just take a gluten-free positioning.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: Because grain-free is seemingly more expensive, more complex-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: ... not something they even care about. These guys are just scaling, you know, they're going for it, and if we can just own and kind of wave the grain-free flag, there's this passionate group of- of athletes-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: ... at the time CrossFit again was really just starting to get going too-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... that are looking for grain-free products.

BEN P: Right. And most of the grain-free products at that time were pet food, right?

BEN F: Absolutely.

BEN P: If- if- if they existed, if-

BEN F: If they existed.

BEN P: ... if they existed, which was very rare.

BEN F: It was, like, EPIC.

BEN P: It was more a pet ... yeah.

BEN F: EPIC bar, um, and, uh, it was ... There was just a handful of companies that were-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... even contemplating that space, and so ... and a lot of it was also sweets. You know-

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: ... a lot of brownie mixes and- and- and cookies and- and whatnot, and-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: So that was that moment where we just said, "That's our guardrails. We're ... We'll always be grain-free, and by default then we'll always be gluten-free."

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: But if we can do that-

BEN P: So you leaned into that differentiation-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... because you- you said, "If- if we're going head to head with this ...," you know, at the time you weren't even thinking about the b- the bigger Bimbo Bakeries of the world or whatever else. You're like, we can't even compete with what had- had become this very large local-

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: ... business in terms of Udi's. "If we're just doing the same thing that Udi's is doing, then we're gonna lose-"

BEN F: Absolutely.

BEN P: "... because we don't have a million dollars to spend on Facebook ads."

BEN F: (laughs) Which damn, I wish we did, but, um-

BEN P: Sure. That's- that ... Well-

BEN F: No, it would-

BEN P: Today it might be a waste, but back then it was a really good idea.

BEN F: Yeah, right (laughs). Back then it was a good spend, yeah.

BEN P: That's right.

BEN F: Uh, but that was that moment where we really ... we focused the brand and we knew that that's where our n- ... Our North Star was grain-free, and if we just kept kind of moving towards that, um, that maybe we could grow a nice little business around that, and that we could shut out some of the noise around us, and I think ... I- I don't -

BEN P: What- what was that noise to you?

BEN F: Um, I think trying ... Like, in that moment, like, trying to court gluten-free consumers was almost overwhelming, because it was a little bit of a land grab.

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: You know? All these, all these huge, um, you know, CPG companies were coming into the space. Just anything, potato chips all of a sudden were gluten, right? Anyone.

BEN P: Right. Things that never had gluten in them in the first place.

BEN F: Right.

BEN P: Right?

BEN F: A- and- and-

BEN P: Like, now had a big gluten-free badge kind of.

BEN F: Big GF symbol on the front.

BEN P: That's right, that's right.

BEN F: And s- and so that was, like, kind of overwhelming.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: You know? How do you, how do you court, you know, a- at the time the statistic was 1% of all Americans have ce- you know? Like there is just ... it- it didn't feel like ... It w- didn't feel reasonable.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: Paleo CrossFit seemed narrow and- and more that we could drill into that consumer, and also, like, we could with our very limited marketing dollars court them. And it was more potent.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: And, yeah.

BEN P: I- I always think of that as it- it's sort of a proxy, right? So the- the example, and there's a couple of examples, you've got, you know, vegans are roughly, you know, th- I think it's growing, but historically it was, like, 2% of the population, right? Or, uh, people who keep kosher-

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: ... is a relatively small, uh, portion of the population. And yet, having products that- that meet the requirements of those- those dietary restrictions sometimes signals a- again in this proxy way, "This is a very clean product," or-

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: ... "This is a safe product," or- or- or maybe a mindful, attentive product-

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: ... something along those lines. And so, I think in some, in some respects in that- that strategic decision that you and Stacey made where, you know ... Again, at that moment a lot of people actually went really hardcore, like, paleo, right?

BEN F: Right.

BEN P: So- so you could have- ha- have taken that ... That fork in the road was, "Oh, we're going after the CrossFitters," or something like that, "So I'll have a caveman-"

BEN F: Right.

BEN P: "... on- on the front of my, o- of my box."

BEN F: Sure.

BEN P: You made a decision to say, "No, we're not gonna down this- this overt ..." N- not that you were against and- and certainly were, uh, very, uh, comfortable with the paleo community-

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: ... but you didn't necessarily go down that path as a brand i- i- in f- in terms of putting paleo first. How did you-

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: ... make that decision to go grain-free rather than paleo or something else?

BEN F: Well, and it's interesting too, because in the beginning we were calling ourselves Cappello's Pasta, and, like, even ... And I don't know if it was that same day, but shortly after we started to get some sales we were like, "What if we want to do other things?"

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: And so that went away and it was just Cappello's.

BEN P: Did you ever consider, like, doing, like, catering to this- this particular CrossFit-

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: ... paleo crowd where you're like, "Oh, we're gonna be really different. Should we, should we have a- a b- you know, again, a b- a black and white bam-bam type-

BEN F: Yeah, yeah.

BEN P: ... type thing on there, or ..." 'Cause you d- ... again, I think you're-

BEN F: No.

BEN P: ... you're artistic and design sensibilities would ... probably, uh, would foreclose that.

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: But, uh, how did you, how did you decide to m- ... You- you made a really big shift-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... in your, in your positioning. You're like, "No, we're not just competing against other gluten-free products." Because again-

BEN F: Sure.

BEN P: ... at this point as you're starting to get some traction, there are more and more gluten-free options-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: S- s- beginning to flood the market.

BEN F: Absolutely.

BEN P: And so you made a very timely decision to not play the same game.

BEN F: Right. Yeah, a- and the idea of having it be, you know, I don't know how I could rename Cappello's to have a caveman thing in there.

BEN P: Right (laughs).

BEN F: "Cave-pello's" or something, or (laughs)-

BEN P: "Ca- Cave-pello's."

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: Yeah, that's right.

BEN F: Uh, but that, you know, I think we just intuitively or- or just through our own, as you had mentioned, just design kind of guardrails aesthetic, that wasn't something we wanted to do. And I think we felt even back then that we could just have a brand that invoked a lot of the things we were excited about, design, quality. I mean, the- the quality of the products that Stacey's developed are really exceptional, and those were the drivers. And

then by being naturally gluten- gluten and- and grain-free, that was kind of a byproduct of just a great product.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: And so, we just kept driving with that, and- and- and trying to turn on folks who were looking for one step further than gluten-free, going into this grain-free world trying to court them, because that's how we felt ultimately we could grow the brand.

BEN P: Right. How did you know early on when you made that decision, how did you know whether or not that was working?

BEN F: Hmm.

BEN P: Because you have ... You know, at the gluten-free stage-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... you had that line, right?

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: The- the line for one single-

BEN F: Absolutely, yeah.

BEN P: ... strand of pasta.

BEN F: Totally. Well, I mean, the business continued to just grow-

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: ... so it's hard to just look back in time and say there was just that one thing we did that really, you know, gave the brand the ability to keep growing. But it- it gave us the ability again to just kind of let the noise die out and not feel so concerned about, like, everyone just being like, "What ..." I- I don't even know how to articulate it. It was just there was so much, like, emphasis in those early days on gluten-free, and, like, that it- it just didn't ... It almost felt like that was too popular.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: And we just wanted to kind of do something a little bit more low-key and differentiated one layer deeper, and also nutritionally we just saw all the gluten-free stuff coming out just thinking, "Man, this is just crap."

BEN P: Very nutritionally m- devoid, yeah.

BEN F: Absolutely. Um, and in a lot of ways it was, you know, like, kind of mimicking of the fat-free-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: ... era where there ... just everything, yeah, was just labeled "fat-free."

BEN P: It made, it made people feel better about themselves, but it wasn't actually better for them at all.

BEN F: Right.

BEN P: Right, okay. That's good stuff. So, how does, ho- how does your- your- your charming little farmers market grain-free now-

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: ... pasta company turn into what we know as- as Cappello's today-

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: ... right? So you- you guys, you make, uh, you make pizza crusts, you make pizzas, you make cookie dough, you make all kinds of things.

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: And what ... ho- how did that ... at what point along the way did you know ... You knew early on that you didn't want to just be a pasta company.

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: But did you know what you wanted to be?

BEN F: No. And maybe we still don't. You know, that's- that's-

BEN P: It's a process of discovery.

BEN F: ... the big- big question sometimes. Um, we put a lot of emphasis on our pizza business, and to get more into, like, the business details, I think that's 'cause we feel like there's a big, big opportunity there. Consumers really understand frozen pizza. It's a pretty, um, established, you know, purchasing habit, and- and that category is the largest category that we play in in terms of dollar volume.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: But our pasta business continues to just be a really foundational and solid piece of our business, but as you know our- our pastas are \$9.99 in Whole Foods, and, you know, that's not gonna be approachable maybe to all, um, all Americans, where a \$10.00 pizza is right in that kind of sweet spot of premium, but not over the top in terms of what people are used to paying for for a, for a better-for-you pizza. You know, it's not gonna compete with Totino's or Tombstone, and we have no desire to do that.

BEN P: Help our listeners understand, how did you ... wa- was ... Were you simply seizing opportunities that presented themselves to you-

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: ... or was there, was there sort of a master plan? Because m- uh, I- I'll put it this way. There's not for the casual observer a logical connection between, "We're gonna make pizza and cookie dough."

BEN F: Right.

BEN P: How does that happen?

BEN F: Well, the cookie dough was an interesting and unexpected part of our business, and originally, um, we were approached by some cookbook authors to develop a recipe for them, and we are not co-manufacturers. That wasn't something that we necessarily were interested in doing. Sweets, in fact, wasn't neces- necessarily something Stacey and I were passionate about or- or thought about doing.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: But it seemed like there was something there to explore, and we ended up coming to an agreement with them and- and- and commercializing that product. And it's really good, it's- it's a great product, and- and there was some, you know, some tweaking done to commercialize it and to kind of get it to where it is, but overall it- it's a great product, and- and that got us into that side of our business. But that was in 2015 I want to say, and it really ... You know, in those early days I think we were still kind of like, "Well, let's try this, and let's try that." And going back in time-

BEN P: Throwing the proverbial pasta against the wall.

BEN F: Yeah. And I- I think going back in time, maybe we ... If I could tell my 2015 self anything it probably would have been, "Hey, people love this pasta product. Keep your head down and just focus on this one thing, and really get your margins in line, get your vision, um, in line for where this could be, and- and what the size of the prize is, so to speak."

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: "How big could this business really be, and maybe it's just in the walls of Whole Foods. Maybe it's just in the natural channel." But I think that would have kept out again some of the distraction, which is funny 'cause it ... Early on we had that idea to, "Okay, let's not be distracted. Let's focus on grain-free." But then you get some traction and you get some revenue and you get-

BEN P: And you get opportunities that come your way.

BEN F: Absolutely. Um-

BEN P: And it's good to be opportunistic.

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: Certainly I'm sure you've- you've benefited, uh, in many ways from being opportunistic.

BEN F: But it can also be dilutive and distracting.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: And- and- and that's the ... one of the biggest things I've learned along this journey, and we've worked a lot with the former global president of the Mars Corporation Brian Camastral, and- and he is a mentor and a friend, and he really gave us some amazing tools. He- he used a value driver system, and so basically within the Mars Corporation, you know, they had these six or seven north stars that he was able to align one of the world's largest privately-held organizations around, you know, and- and give that focus.

BEN P: But a- again, does everything from- from chocolate confections to pet food, and all kinds of stuff.

BEN F: Bananas.

BEN P: Huge company.

BEN F: I don't know if they do bananas, but it is bananas, you know?

BEN P: Yeah (laughs), it is a bananas proposition.

BEN F: (laughs) It- it really is. I mean, and they're in ... I mean, they make the Snickers bar. It's like-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... one of the most widely-distributed products in ... on the globe. So he really ... Working with him gave us framework and structure around how to focus a team and how to focus an organization, and gosh, those would have been such great tools to get earlier on, because I think we would have been a little more hesitant as those opportunistic opportunities came up. And- and not that a- again, we would have done anything different, because again I- I truly am a person of, like, "The journey is what ... That's the gift." Um, but yeah, so the pizza business, you know, that came up because we really felt like ultimately that felt on-brand. Cookie dough, not so much. But, you know, being kind of internally Italian-inspired and thinking about-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... ways that we could extend the brand, and also give people more of an entry w- point into the brand, because I think there still is resistance around buying a \$10.00 box of pasta. Now, once you buy it you immediately can understand why.

BEN P: And it's worth it.

BEN F: It's ... I- I ... We never get complaints around the price once people buy it.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: But again, thinking about how can we really give nutrient density, um, modern nutrition, to folks in a more accessible way, u- u- ultimately we arrived at frozen pizza. Almond flour, you know, based crust frozen pizza was that opportunity, yeah.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: So I don't know if that's answering the question, but yeah.

BEN P: No, that make- that ... It makes a lot of sense. So, as you, a- as you contemplate ... Like, as you think back on the journey, were there ... was there ... Were there one or two moments where you or Stacey, or maybe both of you-

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: ... had- had kind of that crossroads, like, "Oh gosh, what did we do? Why- why are we here?" Like, is ... "This was all a big mistake, I'm so sorry." Right? Like, did you have any moments along the way where you really had to have ... had to kind of face that- that existential crisis as, uh, a- as you were growing this thing?

BEN F: Uh, I mean, on the car ride over here probably.

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: I had (laughs)-

BEN P: E- every morning.

BEN F: Every morning. Um, well, you know, I think there is ... Y- you- you almost kind of have to have that. It doesn't have to be so dramatic every day.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: But when you're making something that never existed before and you're creating this thing, and every day it's evolving and growing in all sorts of ways that you never thought it would, and there's all sorts of really interesting problems to solve every day that come that you never anticipated, um, you do kind of take a step back and say, "Why are ... What am I doing? Why am I doing all this?" But then I also, like, I cannot for the life of me think about what else I would be doing. And so, that pro- constant problem-solving and response to that is a real joy in a lot of ways for me. And yes, it's challenging, 'cause a lot of times you do feel like, you know, the world is kind of evaporating in front of your eyes, or like, "Oh my god, are we ever gonna get through ..."

Well, I'll use this as an example. So, we ... when we first launched our pizza line, we were the first company to ever make a grain-free claim on a pizza, um, for a USDA product, for our pepperoni pizza.

BEN P: Okay.

BEN F: And here we are committing to Whole Foods that we're going to launch this product, we're going to hit their timeline, it's going to be, you know, the first top grain-free pepperoni pizza in the market. Um, and the USDA was just like, "[inaudible 01:07:22]. Not going to happen." Then-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: ... the political climate ended up totally halting the USDA-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: ... um, and I forget-

BEN P: Because of government shutdowns or something like that?

BEN F: Yeah, it was the government shut-

BEN P: Okay.

BEN F: I mean, this was a couple years ago. I mean-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: But, like, all the ... It's like, "Wait, what? Now that's happening?"

BEN P: Right, yeah.

BEN F: So, like, those are the things.

BEN P: "I- I never knew that the federal government could impact my launch of pizza." Right.

BEN F: Absolutely. And I remember I was-

BEN P: And of course it can.

BEN F: ... actually joking about that in the, in the office. Like, how ridiculous is this?

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: And also, how interesting is this? Like, if you would have told that kid who was running away, you know, 30 years ago that this is what he was going to be thinking about-

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: ... I would have been like, "That's ... doesn't even ... I don't even know what you're talking about."

BEN P: Run farther, kid!

BEN F: Right (laughs), right, exactly.

BEN P: Yeah. (laughs)

BEN F: "Keep going, Fievel!" Um, but I think that- that is what keeps us probably, you know, all motivated is that constant problem-solving and, like, figuring it out, and then also trying to just show up and be real and bring, one of our core values at Cappello's is excellence, and bring that excellence, bring collaboration, responsibility, well-being, mutuality. Those are our five core values, and- and- and showing up with those every day to- to solve these problems together, but yeah, there's, I mean, there's ... The USDA is one thing. I mean, I could think of all ... predatory lawsuits. I mean, you name it. Like, there are so-

BEN P: Oh, sure.

BEN F: ... many things that-

BEN P: Things that just come out of left field.

BEN F: Left ... And it's always left field, you know? Um, doing a deal, potentially doing a private equity deal, and, um, a partner leaves, or, you know, whatever it might be. You just never know these ... And it's ... I ... You almost have to, like-

BEN P: Yeah, the partner who's shepherding the deal goes away.

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: Like, "Oh, okay, nevermind."

BEN F: A- and you just, you ... I feel like that's, like, what you have to be kind of on the edge of your seat for all the time-

BEN P: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN F: ... and ready for, because if it were just, like, a cut and dry, here's the path, everyone would be pouring into that funnel.

BEN P: Absolutely.

BEN F: But that's- that's not the case, and, like, the resilience and the keeping your attitude positive and the energy to get up and do it over and over again, that's, like ... I think that's what every great book of every entrepreneur ... Like, that's all the same.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: That's the formula.

BEN P: Yeah. I think of it as, uh, dynamic adaptive problem-solving, right? That you're constantly-

BEN F: Yes, I love that.

BEN P: ... evaluating, looking at, like, what's coming at you and- and you do have a, do you have a framework? It's not that there's a- a set of predetermined canned answers to all these things. It's do you have an approach for how you're thinking about those problems.

BEN F: Absolutely.

BEN P: So I want to switch gears just a little bit-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... and- and- and ask you about your ... Obviously yoga is a really big part of your life, has been for several years. How does your yoga practice, and- and you're also a yogi in addition to that too, right? You're- you're- you're teaching yoga.

BEN F: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN P: How does your yoga practice impact or influence your business life?

BEN F: Hmm. I mean, I know it does, but I don't know if I could figure out one way in which it does, if that makes sense.

BEN P: Do you feel like it gives you a clarity about some things that you might not otherwise have?

BEN F: Well, I feel c- awfully confused most of the time.

Multiple people: (laughing)

BEN F: I think that's part of it, you know? Despite my decisive nature, I feel like internally there's a lot of kind of, you know, ping-pong back and forth on- on things. But I- I think f- I think here's where the yoga comes into play for me. Um, how it translates into our business I'm not as clear on, but when ... What did you call it? Decisive co-

BEN P: Dynamic adaptive, uh, decision-making.

BEN F: Yeah. Dynamic, yes, adaptive decision-making. That- that's the piece where it comes into play, I think. Because when things are really turbulent or feeling extra hard, that's when I'll use that practice, that discipline, to try to stay level, and- and know that it will shift, it will change. Pretty much anything we do is not going to be, you know, the end of the world.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: Gosh, I hope so.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: Um, and- and I think that's where for me it comes into play is being able to in the mornings when I'm, when I'm having my time to stretch and to sit, that gives me a cadence that I can hopefully carry into the rest of my day. Does it always happen that way? No, 'cause I'm a human being and I'm-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... emotional, and I'm passionate. Um, and that's something I've really had to learn how to, not curb, but to contain a little bit more for other people, because I can be really excited about something and I can be really also heavy-handed in- in the way that I approach things sometimes. Or not even heavy-handed, but just, um, intense. Which is a good, a good trait, but sometimes I realize, like, that is really damaging to other people, because they think, "Oh my god, Ben's a- going ... we're going left. Like, we all better go left." But like, really I'm like, I'm just kind of pontificating or saying things out- out loud or just getting ... trying to get a read on the room, you know?

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: But I forget my influence. (laughs)

BEN P: These are trial balloons, yeah.

BEN F: I forget my influence, and-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... and that's a self-awareness piece I've really had to work on.

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: Um, and even just, you know, if you have a shitty mood, how that will just-

BEN P: It affects everybody else.

BEN F: ... like, ripple. And I'm like, "No way does that affect everyone. That's bullshit. Like, not me."

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: "Like, no one cares what I'm doing." And then I have to take a-

BEN P: They do.

BEN F: ... step back and realize they do, and shame on me for not being more self-aware around that.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: Um, so the self-awareness development that yoga and meditation give me, I think that's where it translates into the business, and- and just encouraging people. I- I- I've- I've

always been very, um, driven by alternative ways of living and just approaching different lifestyles and spirituality, and just exploring all of those things and those connectors, and, um, you know, a lot of it was from early just psychedelic experiences that I had that I really questioned how this is all put together and woven together, and then also a lot of just the kind of synchronicities.

And one of my, um, I guess heroes is Ram Dass, who was formerly known as Richard Alpert, and him and Timothy Leary were the ones who got kicked out of Harvard for doing all of those psychedelic experiences, and in the early '60s, you know, those two split camps, and Richard Alpert at the time went to India and- and met the Baba and had a- a- an awakening, and that's where he became Ram Dass, and he brought back, you know, some really beautiful teachings. A- and one of those teachings is that there are no coincidences, that it is all just this kind of divine reality that's ... that we're a part of, and- and as we can take a step back and be more in the seat of the observer, we're able to really start to- to connect with that and realize there's a lot more moving through us and through others, weaving us all together, than we realize. And- and there's a lot of magic in that that I'm really interested in and that goes into- to Cappello's in the sense that that exchange I was talking about earlier on shelf, you know, this little thing that Stacey and I came up with on our living room floor, um, that energy is still really I think prevalent and woven into everything we're doing, and we were really blessed to have people like my brother, who's a brilliant designer, work on our business and- and articulate an even deeper and more resonant kind of version and vision of what we had on that floor eight years ago, nine years ago. A- an- and that's, like, I'm so interested in that piece and, like, how that all gets woven together, and again, like, that's, uh, that's part of, like, that yoga practice and that spirituality is woven into- to Cappello's, but I can't necessarily say, like, you know, when we hold team meetings, I'm thinking, like-

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: ... "Okay, like, we're gonna do-"

BEN P: We s- we sit in a circle-

BEN F: Yeah (laughs).

BEN P: ... sit ... Thi- this pose, all that.

BEN F: And trust me, I've tried that stuff.

BEN P: Yeah, yeah.

BEN F: It doesn't work.

BEN P: I love it. So, you've done a- a ... I think you've been really, uh, savvy to really seek out mentors and- and other- o- other voices in your life.

BEN F: Sure.

BEN P: How ... What- what are some of the impacts or- or maybe decisive moments along the way that- that you feel like you've benefited from the advice of somebody who either has a different perspective or more experience?

BEN F: Well, I think mentorship is the greatest gift any entrepreneur can seek. Um, I truly do believe that, and it's really easy to get siloed and to think, like, you've got all the answers, or that even if you don't you're going to figure it out. But mentors can accelerate that process dramatically and really keep you from, um, not only beating your head against the wall but just taking some of, like, the wrong turns that I think can really slow a brand's momentum down.

Um, and not to pick on you for a minute, but I really feel like when, you know, your involvement at Siete Family Foods was really a gift to them in the sense that you had a lot of great experiences that you brought to the table with some really passionate entrepreneurs and a great product and a great family, um, but I feel like there was a lot of mentorship there that you stewarded, and- and that's ... a- and when I think about some of the early just days of, like, even the first grocery bar that brought us in that gave us that idea to be like, "Freeze this stuff, bring it to me frozen, keep it frozen the whole time, and when you slack it out you're going to get more shelf time, more shelf life."

BEN P: That little droplet of advice reverberates through your whole business.

BEN F: Absolutely.

BEN P: ... to this day, right?

BEN F: To this day. And, um, and I think it- it is about mentorship, but also just being a sponge and reading as many diff- you know. And I've just watched this series on Bill Gates on Netflix, and I mean, he is a ... just a vor- voracious reader, and y- an incredible just digester of information.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: And not all of us are wired that way, but I feel like there are so many things to be mined in so many different realms, and- and with so much information out there it can be overwhelming at times, but I do feel like there's a lot of nuggets there. Where mentors can really help though is they focus some of that, right, and they might have a specific ... You might have a s- specific question that they've already answered, you know, or answered some iteration close to it. And- and one of our board members and mentors that's most relevant right now I think in our business cycle is Phil Anson, the former founder of EVOL Foods. And Phil, you know, he's 41 years old. His journey as an entrepreneur is just incredible. I mean, he was literally, like, hand-rolling burritos, selling them at the Rockies game-

BEN P: And- and EVOL Foods was ... originally was Phil's-

BEN F: Phil's Fresh.

BEN P: ... Fresh, yeah.

BEN F: So he's like-

BEN P: Made burritos, yeah.

BEN F: ... hand-rolling burritos, selling them as Phil's Fresh at the Rockies games, going to then that cycle through or that stage of rebranding as EVOL, then making, you know, bowls and burritos and- and growing a really brilliant and disruptive brand, which was eventually acquired by Boulder Brands. And what I think is so fascinating with Phil's journey is that when they got folded into Boulder Brands, he became more or less their head of innovation. And, you know, he was probably, what, 36 when that was happening? And then there was a lot of disruption and kind of inner turmoil at Boulder Brands, which is a publicly traded company, and Phil more or less found himself in this general manager role at a very young age, and they packaged that business up and sold it to Pinnacle Foods for just shy of a billion dollars. And that journey from, like, him talking to us about, like ... to me and Stacey about, you know, literally sleeping on, like, huge bags, 50-pound bags of beans in his warehouse and faci- you know, production facility because he was just exhausted-

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: ... and he was gonna wake up in a few hours and do it all over again, to selling a publicly-traded company to another one, is just an incredible journey.

BEN P: That in turn sold to another one, Conagra. Right.

BEN F: Right. (laughs) Now it's owned by Conagra.

BEN P: Correct, yeah.

BEN F: Um, and- and so, his journey not only as an entrepreneur but also as an executive, but just his understanding of food systems, of- of also what he did at EVOL where, you know, they were the first to bring things like truffle into a mac and cheese, and that was, like ... Those precious elements, as Phil calls them, were so important to him as the owner, but also as a way of, like, keeping loyalty to his brand, but giving consumers this sense of, like, awe and inspiring them and discovery, and- and all the things you hope great brands can do.

BEN P: There's a, there's a premium-ness and an indulgence to that.

BEN F: Absolutely, yeah. Truffle in a frozen-

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: ... entrée.

BEN P: Right.

BEN F: And, um, but his just understanding of- of business in general, and then also his love of food, has been just incredible as an influence on- on the two of us. And- and because he's ... We're based in Denver and he's up in Boulder, you know, we get to see him at least once a week. He's on our LT calls, um, and just also works on various side projects. But his encouragement and mentorship and the fact that he's been there, done it before, um, God, it's just been-

BEN P: It's a huge anchor for you guys, yeah.

BEN F: Huge anchor. But yeah, mentors, I mean, if that's the one thing, that would be a big takeaway, is find mentors.

BEN P: Yeah.

BEN F: 'Cause, gosh, what a gift, you know?

BEN P: That's awesome. That's really good advice. So, what ... As we wrap up here-

BEN F: Yeah.

BEN P: ... what- what are you most excited about? Like, what- what- what's-

BEN F: Hmm.

BEN P: ... on the horizon for you, for Cappello's, that- that- that gets you really jazzed, you know, to, uh, you know, conquer the next day?

BEN F: So, this'll be somewhat ironic, 'cause I scored so low on the people assessment.

BEN P: (laughs)

BEN F: Um, but I'm most excited about our team, and Stacey and I really grinded and we still grind, um, but it was such a small team for so many years, and so many people were wearing so many different hats, and none of those people necessarily had some sort of expertise in whatever area they were in. We were all very passionate and just willing to get in there and figure it out. But in this last year, we've been able to hire some real professionals into our business and professionalize our business, and also hire people who not only are super competent and capable, but culturally are just incredible fits. And that's, like, the perfect kind of marriage I think with where our business is at in terms of the right product mix, the pricing being right on our frozen pizza business, launching the world's first almond flour pizza with Whole Foods in- in June.

Um, I think the brand now is really, like, able to- to win in a way it wasn't able to before. Not that we were losing, but I just feel like kind of the growth curve that we're experiencing, which is getting, uh, steeper and steeper, is just more digestible as a founder, um, but also knowing that there's these incredible people working in their parts of the business in the departments that they really excel at. And so, the people piece for me is the thing I'm most excited about, and- and it's just been fun. Like, it's just so fun to have, you know, that kind of energy in the business, and people who I didn't even know a year ago just so excited about what they're doing and what we're doing, and- and how it all is coming together. And- and that's invigorating me and- and giving me kind of a new, um, not a rebirth in the business, but just a n- ... It's a new cycle, a new stage, and I'm excited about that.

BEN P: Man, that's really, that's really awesome. I- I'm excited that you joined us today, and I- I appreciate it. So, uh, so Ben Frohlichstein, uh, from Cappello's, who ... co-founder, co-CEO along with Stacey Marcellus, um, it's been a real delight to have you here.

BEN F: (laughs) Thanks, man.

BEN P: Always fun to see you.

BEN F: Absolutely.

BEN P: Always great to see your smile, and, uh, thanks for sharing all of your- your wisdom and your experience with our listeners. So, great to see you, man. Thank you.

BEN F: Thanks. Thanks for having me.

For links to some of the people and companies we mentioned during our conversation today, be sure to visit barcodestartup.com/podcast for the show notes and a complete transcript of this conversation.

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Thank you so much for listening to the Barcode Podcast, and we'll see you back here next week for a new conversation to help equip emerging consumer brands.